

## **Interview with John Hamlett**

### **By Joe Mendel**

After graduating from college John began working in a cabinet shop, things starting changing in the shop and he decided to look for employment elsewhere. Jobs were scarce as the country was in the middle of a recession, having no luck finding one he had decided to create his own. Allegheny County, VA is approximately 90% forested and there were a lot of sawmills but almost no drying facilities, so John began researching solar kilns to start his own wood drying business. During his research he stopped by the shop of a well known banjo maker and showed them the banjo he had built. After milling a walnut tree into banjo timbers for them they offered him a job, he worked for them for over a decade before striking out on his own.

**Joe Mendel:** When did you build your first instrument?

**John Hamlett:** In the early 80s, I did a lot of studying and reading before I actually started any physical work. I think I finished my first instrument (a banjo) around 83 or 84.

**JM:** What are you doing now?

**JH:** Building and repair, building mostly mandolins, a few guitars and banjos, repairing all three of those.

**JM:** Do you do many repairs?

**JH:** Yep, I spend more time repairing than building.

**JM:** What is your favorite part of building?

**JH:** Two favorite parts really: First, making the early decisions, getting the design together, anticipating the build, choosing and milling the wood.

Second, finishing the final set up and hearing it played by a great player. Everything in between is the reason they call this a job, though I do enjoy carving and bending wood and working with hand tools when they're appropriate.

For some reason, I really like seeing the instrument parts emerge from the raw wood as I do the cutting and milling. That's a part of the process that a lot of builders farm out, but I enjoy it so I do it myself. It also gives me more control over things like grain direction and orientation.

**JM:** How did your luthierie career get started?

**JH:** My career??!

I was doing some hobby building and repair and working at a cabinet shop. I was thinking of starting a wood drying business using solar kilns and I went to tour a kiln drying operation. It was about 5 miles from a well known instrument manufacturer, so I made an appointment to tour that business the same day. I took my first instrument with me to show to them, and they offered me a job. It took a while to make the decision, but I went to work there and officially turned pro.

**JM:** How have you promoted your work?

**JH:** Mostly by showing instruments to players and letting them play them. I have a web site for an on line presence, but the instruments sell themselves. I can tell people all I want to that I build nice instruments, but until they play them, they don't really believe me. Getting instruments out there in the hands of players, that's what works.

**JM:** Describe your approach in building mandolins.

**JH:** The Gibson Loar F5 is the model, though I've departed from it in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways. I try to build for physical strength of the instrument with minimal weight. I think lightness in a wooden stringed instrument is an advantage, so I choose materials carefully and try to avoid leaving excess wood where it is not needed for strength. I've gradually developed my own system for arching and graduating top and back plates that differs from the Loar model. I'm trying to build a sonically balanced mandolin with good string to string balance and good fret to fret balance. Loars tend to have a strong mid range boost that works well in an ensemble situation, but can be difficult to record and to mic on stage. I try to bring the treble and bass ends of the sound into better balance with the mids without losing the characteristic chop or woof of an F5.

**JM:** Who and what are your influences?

**JH:** Too many to mention: I've learned a lot from many good builders and players. I've had a lot of conversations with many good players and builders, but I've also done repair work on a lot of good (and not so good) instruments. You really start to see and hear the differences in mandolins when you take them apart and put them back together. Even simple set up work on mandolins built by various builders can be an eye opener, the great ones as well as the lesser ones. Learning what doesn't work well is at least as important as learning what does work well.

**JM:** Do you use a lot of jigs and tooling?

**JH:** Probably less than a lot of builders, though I'll eventually make more jigs. I enjoy understanding how tools work, and I enjoy using hand tools. I can often find an

efficient way to do a job with a hand tool that I enjoy much more than setting up some router jig or something. I think more like a tool user than like a manufacturer. I might sacrifice a little bit of efficiency sometimes, but I like shavings and music on the radio much better than dust and screaming power tools.

**JM:** How many instruments do you build at a time?

**JH:** I tend to have quite a few somewhere in progress, perhaps a dozen, but I seldom finish more than two at a time. I'll do multiple tasks in the early stages on 4 to 6 mandolins, but when the detail work starts I usually separate out two of them to finish up. I generally build them in the order that they are ordered, but sometimes my own order gets pushed back in favor of one that results in a pay day when it's done.

**JM:** Tell me about your musical background.

**JH:** Piano lessons from first grade to sixth grade, drums in school bands and semi-professionally in working bands for about 15 years, then I decided to learn to play something I could carry with me and that turned out to be the banjo. I'm strictly self-taught as a banjo player. I've managed to learn a few rudimentary things on guitar and mandolin too.

**JM:** What type of woods do you use?

**JH:** I have four species of spruce for mandolins. I use mostly red spruce, but I like Sitka spruce a lot, and I occasionally use Engelmann. I have European spruce from 2 or 3 different sources that I haven't used yet. I have 5 species of maple. I use mostly sugar maple, but sometimes red maple and big leaf maple. I have European maple from a couple of sources that I haven't used yet.

**JM:** Where do you get your instrument wood?

**JH:** I often say I'm an opportunist when it comes to wood. If I have a chance to grab some instrument wood I try to get it regardless of the source. I've had a portable sawmill since 1986 and I've sawed and stored a lot of good wood in the years since.

When I was working for a manufacturer I used the wood that was there. The usual method there was to buy wood in bulk in large boards then work the instrument parts out of those larger pieces. I like that method because I can make my own decisions about grain direction and orientation and other personal preferences, so I still do that most of the time, but I also have wood that I bought from instrument wood suppliers as blanks for instrument parts.

In 1989 and again in 1990 I went with some folks and cut some red spruce trees on top of a couple of mountains in West Virginia. We worked the trees into split billets right there on the mountain top and brought them home for instrument tops. I've been using that wood for most of my tops ever since.

When I started setting up to make mandolins under my own name, I contacted several hardwood suppliers and told them what I wanted for instrument backs; quartersawn curly sugar maple. That's something that is not regularly done because of the characteristics of the trees, so suppliers normally don't have quartered sugar maple. Two of the suppliers took my phone number, however, and said they would contact me if they got anything like what I wanted. I didn't expect to hear from them, but eventually, we're talking months here if not years, I heard back from both of them and they had just what I wanted. Fortunately, I had enough money on hand to buy the wood they had, and that is the maple I've been using for most of my mandolin backs ever since.

A couple of years ago I got a call from a friend (another luthier) whose neighbor had bulldozed some trees out of a pasture. My friend was cutting firewood from the pile of trees and found curly maple in one of them. I traded him some red spruce guitar tops for the tree and prepared and dried the wood. I've started the first mandolin from that wood but haven't finished anything made with it yet.

Anyway, there's an idea of my wood gathering "philosophy". There are several very good "tonewood" suppliers these days, and when I need something specific I go to them, but they're not my main sources.

**JM:** What is your most popular body style?

**JH:** I build about half and half F5 style and A5 style mandolins with occasional odd things like flat tops, mandolas and octave mandolins.

**JM:** Do you make all the parts for your instruments?

**JH:** Almost; I don't make the tuners and I no longer make my own bridges since Steve Smith tooled up to make them for me. Mine are different from the Loar type bridges, though the difference is mostly cosmetic.

**JM:** How would you describe the sound of your mandolins?

**JH:** Balanced; I try for a good balance from string to string and from fret to fret. They're also fairly loud, though I try for more tone than loudness. I like the treble notes that I get from them; clear, ringing, bell-like. They have a good chop but are not overly bassy.

**JM:** Do you have any long-term goals in building?

**JH:** Mostly to build instruments that are well regarded and respected by musicians as

well as those who appreciate the detail work that goes into them. I suppose I want the instruments to command respect from those who know instruments.

**JM:** Have your mandolins changed over the years?

**JH:** Yes, I've developed my ear for mandolin sounds and become more aware of what sound I prefer. The sound has changed slightly to reflect that maturity in my ear. I've also developed my eye for the design of carved top mandolins and my designs have become much more refined as I've developed that understanding and perception. I've gotten a little better at the cosmetic details too, but mostly I think they sound better all the time.

**JM:** What made you decide to try to build a mandolin?

**JH:** When I finished my first instrument, my banjo, one of my picking buddies was so impressed with it that he wanted me to build him a mandolin, so my second instrument was my first mandolin and my first order.

**JM:** What type of finish do you use?

**JH:** I use nitrocellulose lacquer and oil varnish.

**JM:** What do you think makes the great builders great?

**JH:** The great builders have a good understanding of how mandolins work when they are making music and they have learned how to build them so that they work and sound the way they want them to. They have a good eye for aesthetics and design so they make visually attractive instruments, and they have a good eye for detail and good hands to execute that detail. It is the details that separate the great from the good, sonically and aesthetically.

**JM:** How many of your mandolins have you sold?

**JH:** All but two; I've completed about 28 with the next two almost done.

**JM:** Are you currently taking orders? (If so) How long is the typical wait?

**JH:** Yes, I'm currently taking orders. The wait was about two years, but it came down to about 1 year. I've gotten a couple of new orders since I started this interview, so it's probably getting a little longer than a year again.

**JM:** It used to be that builders had their secrets and wouldn't reveal them to anyone. On mandolincafe.com you are very helpful to people with questions regarding building mandolins. What led to the openness that now exists among luthiers? Have you benefited from it?

**JH:** I started hanging out and posting on the mandolin cafe mostly to spread my name around and try to become better known as a mandolin builder. I figured it might be good to let folks know that I've learned some things about mandolins and that I'm not an upstart though I don't have a large body of work to my name (a larger body of work to a former employer's name actually).

The sharing of information among luthiers seems to me to be largely a development related to organizations like the GAL and ASIA, and also the internet. There are still some secrets that builders don't specifically discuss.

Even if I told you everything I could about how I build a mandolin you'd have about as much chance of doing it just like I do as you would conducting a symphony after a professional conductor told you how. Sharing information with other builders isn't a problem for those builders who give out info. Most of this stuff you have to figure out for yourself anyway.

Have I benefitted from it? Absolutely! I think I've learned more from answering questions and taking part in discussions than I have from asking questions.

**JM:** How did you get the idea that you could build instruments?

**JH:** I grew up on a farm. When things broke, you fixed them. If you needed something, you made it. I thought everybody...or nearly everybody...thought that way. Instruments are built by people; I'm a person, so I can build instruments. It seemed simple to me.

**JM:** How is the mandolin market and are you selling everything you build?

**JH:** I can't really speak to the mandolin market in general, though I've heard from friends that their business is down, but my business is still increasing...I think. I'm still pretty unknown compared to some of the more prominent builders so I'm still catching on to some extent. Perhaps my business would be growing faster if the economy was better, but so far so good.

**JM:** Do you accept custom orders?

**JH:** Yes, I do mostly custom builds.

**JM:** There's a "flying by the seat of your pants" aspect to many repairs, do you enjoy that?

**JH:** Yes, and it's a nice change of pace from building. The challenges of repair are enough different from those of building that it's easier for me to stay fresh when I do some of both.

**JM:** Do you get a lot of mandolins in for repair?

**JH:** Right many, though more guitars.

**JM:** Do you ever get nervous or worry about working on particular instruments?

**JH:** I used to year ago, but when you've taken apart a few \$100,000+ instruments and put them back together you get used to it.

**JM:** What's your attitude toward vintage/collectable instruments? Are there some repairs that shouldn't be done even if it makes the instrument "better"?

**JH:** Yes, in many cases. Those instruments have moved beyond being just instruments. They are pieces of history and politically speaking, they should be kept close to original when repaired. Improving them is modification, not repair. If they are unplayable, however, they are no longer instruments, and if a modification is needed to keep them playable I think it should be done but kept as unobtrusive as possible.

**JM:** In the violin world most people seem to understand that with age and use an instrument will need maintenance and repair, but a lot of guitar and mandolin owners have expectations that repairs should be invisible and originality be preserved at all costs, why do you think that is?

**JH:** It's mostly a development from the strong collectors market of recent years. An all original example always brings the most money on the market, and the market price drops with every departure from all original. I do feel that repairs should be as invisible as possible. A repairman should work to the standards and style of the original builder so that his/her work is as nearly undetectable as possible. I have trouble with that sometimes, and make things look a little better than they did originally, but I try to stay within the limits of what might be found on better examples rather than working to modern standards. The standards of detail and workmanship in the better hand made instruments of today are so much higher than in the vintage factory instruments that it can feel strange to duplicate some of the vintage work rather than improving (modifying) it.

**JM:** What is your opinion of cast tailpieces, ivory saddles, tone guards and all the other hot rod type of accessories now available for mandolins?

**JH:** I think a tailpiece is there to hold one end of the strings, and it should look good with the rest of the instrument. There is very little if any contribution to sound from the tailpiece normally, so I feel like it should be a good, functional, attractive piece of machinery and if someone wants to hotrod the sound of his/her mandolin (second guess the builder?) there are other places to do that much more effectively, notably the bridge. I have no particular opinion of ivory saddles. If you have one and it sounds better to you, fine, but it may not sound better to someone else.

Tonegards can be effective ways of getting more sound from some mandolins. I build with backs that are freer than some. In other words, I carve and graduate my backs so that they move more than some other methods of arching a graduation, so they can benefit quite a bit from a tonegard. The freer the back, the more potential benefit, in general, some mandolins and some players get more or less benefit from a tonegard.

**JM:** What's the single best way to improve the tone of a mandolin? How about volume?

**JH:** What is tone? What is better? If I can't get a good definition of tone and a universally accepted understanding of what is good tone as opposed to poor tone there's no way to know what is an improvement let alone how to achieve it.

By volume I assume you mean loudness. A louder instrument can be made by making the bridge, the top, and other parts directly affected by string motion lighter so that the strings get more air moving. That approach, however, has serious trade-offs in terms of sustain and coloration of the sound. If a mandolin is to sound like a mandolin it has to have enough mass in the bridge/top system to give it that characteristic sound, so rather than taking the easy route of making things too light, it might be better to make the thing as efficient as possible in terms of converting string energy to sound.

So, the best tone and volume come from mandolins made from good quality wood, well carved in a coherent system of arching and graduation with the top, back, and air in the instrument working well together.

**JM:** What do you think makes the Loar era F-5's so special?

**JH:** Mostly, their rarity and their place in the history of American music. Also, the structural understanding and aesthetic culture that existed among the Gibson work force when they were made. They were generally good mandolins, but not all great, in my opinion. There are about 2 of them in my top 5 mandolins that I've ever heard though.

**JM:** Are there any materials used in the Loars that aren't available today? How do you deal with that?

**JH:** No, we can get everything now that they had then.

**JM:** How has being able to examine Loars and others changed your approach to building mandolins?

**JH:** I've spent the most time with David McLaughlin's Loar, though I've examined all that I've been able to. Mostly, I've borrowed some of the design features that were well executed by the workers in those days. There's a lot to learn from studying the Loars, but perhaps even more from studying the F2s and F4s.

**JM:** What details are you doing that others don't bother with?

**JH:** I finish some of the parts more than some other builders. I sand and polish my bridges rather than just using them as they come from the machine; I finish the fingerboard extender, just little things like that.

**JM:** Please tell us a little about your shop, your tooling and the balance you try to strike between hand work and power tools?

**JH:** I have good power tools and I use them frequently, but if I can find a way to do a job with a hand tool that is efficient and works well, I'll often choose that method over a power tool even if it takes a little longer. Power tools make loud noise and dust; hand tools make pleasant singing sounds and chips. I'm building instruments because I enjoy it, after all. Speeding up the process through jiggging up and using power tools more may be a more efficient way to make money, but if wanted to make more money I'd be better off getting a high stress 8 to 5 job somewhere. So if, as I said, I'm doing this because I enjoy it, why would I want to make the fun part go by faster (and louder) by using routers to do everything? Mind you I'm not talking about working for 2 hours with a hand tool when I could have done the job in 5 minutes with a power tool; it's more like working for 15 minutes with a hand tool instead of 10 minutes with a power tool.

I don't stand on tradition or use hand tools feeling that they are somehow more noble than power tools, the wood doesn't know what tool shaped it, I just choose the method I prefer and that is a hand tool probably more often than many other builders.

**JM:** It's been great speaking with you, John. Next time I'm out your way I'd love to stop by your shop for a visit. Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed.

John is currently taking orders and may be contacted at: [john@hamlettinstruments.com](mailto:john@hamlettinstruments.com)

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